

American Missionary Association.

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The Progress of Colored Women.

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## THE PROGRESS OF COLORED WOMEN.

BY MRS. MARY CHURCH TERRELL.

Let the future of colored women be judged by the past, since their emancipation, and neither they nor their friends have any cause for anxiety. Though there are many things in the Negro's present status to discourage him, he has some blessings for which to be thankful. Not the least of these is the progress of our women in everything which makes for the culture of the individual and the elevation of the race. Only forty years ago the great masses of colored women bowed under the yoke of bondage, subjected to hardships which neither human nor divine law seemed to soften, and surrounded by influences which put a premium upon immorality and made chastity an impossibility. When Ernestine Rose, Lucretia Mott, Lucy Stone and Susan B. Anthony began that agitation by which colleges were opened to women, and the numerous reforms inaugurated for the amelioration of their condition along all lines, their sisters who groaned in bondage had little reason to hope that these blessings would ever brighten their crushed and blighted lives. For during those days of depression and despair, colored women were not only refused admittance to institutions of learning, but the law of the states in which the majority lived made it a crime to teach them to read. Not only could they possess no property, but even their bodies were not their own. Nothing, in short, that could degrade or brutalize the womanhood of

the race was lacking in that system from which colored women then had little hope of escape. So gloomy were their prospects, so fatal the laws, so pernicious the customs, only forty years ago.

But from the day their fetters were broken, and their minds released from the darkness of ignorance to which for more than two hundred years they had been doomed, from the day they could stand erect in the dignity of womanhood, no longer bound, but free, till to-day, colored women have forged steadily ahead in the acquisition of knowledge and in the cultivation of those graces of character which make for good. To use a thought of the illustrious Frederick Douglass, if judged by the depths from which they have come rather than by the heights to which those blessed with centuries of opportunities have attained, colored women need not hang their heads in shame. Consider, if you will, the almost insurmountable obstacles which have confronted colored women in their effort to educate and cultivate themselves, since their emancipation, and I dare assert, not boastfully, but with pardonable pride, I hope, that the progress they have made and the work they have accomplished will bear a favorable comparison at least with that of their more fortunate sisters, from whom the opportunity of acquiring knowledge and the means of self-culture have never been entirely withheld. For not only are colored women with ambition and aspiration handicapped on account of their sex, but they are everywhere baffled and mocked on account of their race.

Desperately and continuously they are forced to fight that opposition, born of a cruel, unreasonable prejudice, which neither their merit nor their necessity seems able to subdue. Not only because



they are women, but because they are colored women, are discouragement and disappointment meeting them at every turn. Vocations opened and opportunities offered to their more favored sisters have been, and are to-day, closed and barred against them. While those of the dominant race have a variety of trades and pursuits from which they may choose, the woman through whose veins one drop of African blood is known to flow is limited to a pitiable few. So overcrowded are the vocations in which colored women may engage and so poor is the pay in consequence, that only the barest livelihood can be eked out by the rank and file.

And yet, in spite of the opposition encountered, and the obstacles opposed to their acquisition of knowledge and their accumulation of property, the progress made by colored women along these lines has never been surpassed by that of any people in the history of the world. Though the slaves were liberated less than forty years ago, penniless and ignorant, with neither shelter nor food, so great was their thirst for knowledge and so herculean were their efforts to secure it, that there are to-day hundreds of Negroes, many of them women, who are graduates, some of them having taken degrees from the best institutions of the land. From Oberlin, that friend of the oppressed—Oberlin, my dear alma mater—whose name will always be loved and whose praise will ever be sung as the first college in the country which was just, broad and benevolent enough to open its doors to Negroes, and to women, on an equal footing with men, from Wellesley and Vassar, from Cornell and Ann Arbor, from the best high schools throughout the North, East and West, colored girls have been

graduated with honors, and have thus forever settled the question of their capacity and worth. A few months ago, in Chicago, a large number of young men and women of the dominant race, and only one colored girl, competed for a scholarship entitling the successful competitor to an entire course through the Chicago University. As the result of the examination which was held, the only colored girl among them stood first and thus captured this great prize. Wherever colored girls have studied their instructors bear testimony to their intelligence, their diligence and their success.

With this increase of wisdom there has sprung up in the hearts of colored women an ardent desire to do good in the world. No sooner had the favored few availed themselves of such advantages as they could secure than they hastened to dispense these blessings to the less fortunate of their race. With tireless energy and eager zeal, colored women have, since their emancipation, been continuously prosecuting the work of educating and elevating their race, as though upon themselves alone devolved the accomplishment of this herculean task. Of the colored teachers engaged in instructing our youth, it is perhaps no exaggeration to say that fully 90 per cent. are women. In the backwoods, remote from the civilization and comforts of city or town, on the plantations, reeking with ignorance and vice, colored women may be found battling with evils which such conditions always entail. Many a heroine, of whom the world will never hear, has thus sacrificed her life to her race, amid surroundings and in the face of many privations which only martyrs can bear. Shirking responsibility has never been a fault with

which colored women might be truthfully charged. Indefatigably and conscientiously, in public work of all kinds they engage that they may benefit and elevate their race. The result of this labor has been prodigious, indeed. By banding themselves together in the interest of education and morality, by adopting the most practical and useful means to this end, colored women have in thirty short years become a great power for good.

Through the National Association of Colored Women, which was formed by the union of two large organizations in July, 1896, much good has been done in the past, and more will be accomplished in the future, we hope. Believing that it is only through the home that a people can become really good and truly great, the National Association of Colored Women has entered that sacred domain. Homes—more homes, better homes, purer homes, is the text upon which our sermons have been and will be preached. We would have heart to heart talks with our women that we may strike at the root of evils, many of which lie, alas, at the fireside. If the women of the dominant race, with all the centuries of education, culture and refinement back of them, with all the wealth of opportunity ever present with them, feel the need of a mother's congress that they may be enlightened upon the best methods of rearing their children and conducting their homes, how much more do our women, from whom shackles have but yesterday been stricken, need information on the same vital subjects. And so we are working with might and main to establish mothers' congresses on a small scale, wherever our women can be reached.

Against the one-room cabin we have inaugurated



a vigorous crusade. When families of eight or ten men, women and children are all huddled promiscuously together in a single apartment, a condition of things found among our poor all over the land, there is little hope of inculcating morality and modesty. And yet in spite of these environments, which are so destructive of virtue, in spite of the fatal heritage of slavery, and though the safeguards usually thrown around maidenly youth and innocence are in some sections entirely withheld from colored girls, statistics compiled by men not inclined to falsify in favor of my race, show that immorality among colored women is not so great as among women similarly situated in countries like Austria, Italy, Germany, Sweden and France. Questions affecting our legal status as a race are also agitated by our women. In Tennessee and Louisiana, colored women have several times petitioned the legislatures of their respective states to repeal the obnoxious Jim Crow car laws. Nor will any stone be left unturned until this iniquitous and unjust enactment be forever wiped from the statutes of the South.

In every way possible we are calling attention to the barbarity of the convict lease system, of which Negroes, and especially the female prisoners, are the principal victims, in the hope that the conscience of the country may be touched and this stain upon its escutcheon be forever wiped away.

In various sections of the country our women are being aroused to the necessity of establishing day nurseries for the infants of working women. Thousands of our wage-earning mothers with large families dependent almost entirely upon them for support are obliged to leave their infants all day, to be cared for either by young brothers and sis-



ters, who do not know how to attend to them properly, or by some good-natured neighbor, who promises much but who does little. Many of these infants are locked alone in the room from the time the mother leaves in the morning until she returns at night. Not long ago I read in a Southern newspaper that an infant thus locked alone in a room all day while its mother went out to wash had cried itself to death. Recently I have been visiting a day nursery for the infants of working women, and I have been shocked at the miserable little specimens of humanity brought in by mothers who had been obliged to board them out with careless or heartless people. When one thinks of the slaughter of the innocents which is occurring with such pitiless persistency every day, and of the countless thousands maimed for life on account of neglect or cruel treatment during their helpless infancy, it is evident that by establishing day nurseries colored women will render one of the greatest services possible to humanity and the race.

The National Association of Colored Women has chosen as its motto, "Lifting as We Climb." In order to live up to this sentiment its members have determined to come into the closest possible touch with the masses of our women, by whom, whether we will or no, the womanhood of our people will always be judged. It is unfortunate, but it is true, that a majority of the dominant race in this country insists upon judging the Negro by his lowest and most vicious representatives instead of by the more intelligent and worthy classes. It is, therefore, of the greatest importance that the more favored colored women should try to influence for good their illiterate and unfortunate sisters, through whom it is possible to correct

many of the evils which militate so seriously against us, and inaugurate the reforms without which as a race we cannot hope to succeed. Through the medium of clubs and by individual effort as well, the attention of our women is being called to the alarming rapidity with which the Negro is losing ground in the world of labor. If this movement to withhold employment from him continues to grow, we shall soon be confronted with a condition of things disastrous and serious indeed. We are showing our women how fatal it will be to their highest, best interests and to the highest, best interests of their children, if the Negro does not soon build up a reputation for reliability and proficiency. We are preaching in season and out that it should be a part of the religion of every wage-earning colored woman to become thoroughly proficient in whatever work she engages, so that she may render the best service of which she is capable, and thus do her part toward establishing a reputation for excellent workmanship among colored women. Our clubs are being urged to establish schools of domestic science as soon as their means will permit. By founding institutions in which colored women and girls could be trained to be skilled domestics, we should do more to solve the labor question, so far as it affects the colored women, than by using any other means it is in our power to employ. Explain the situation as we may, the fact remains that the trades and vocations which formerly belonged almost exclusively to colored people by common consent are now gradually slipping from their grasp. Depressing though the situation may be, colored women are not sitting supinely by with folded hands, drooping heads and weeping eyes,

but they are doing everything in their power to smooth out the rough roads of labor, over which tiny feet that now patter in play may soon stumble and fall. To our own youth, to our own tradesmen, we are preaching reliability and thorough proficiency. We are also appealing to our large-hearted, broad-minded sisters of the dominant race. We are asking that they both observe themselves and teach their children to respect the lofty principles of justice and humanity upon which this government was founded and of which their own consciences approve. We are asking, also, that they train their children to be broad and just enough to judge men and women by their intrinsic merit, rather than by the adventitious circumstances of race or color or creed. Colored mothers are asking their white sisters to teach their children that when they grow to be men and women, if they deliberately prevent their fellow creatures from earning an honest living by closing the doors of trade against them, the Father of all men will hold them responsible for the crimes which are the result of their injustice and for the human wrecks which the ruthless crushing of hope and ambition always makes. In the name of American children, black childhood as well as white, colored women are asking their white sisters to do all in their power to make the future of our boys and girls as bright and as promising as should be that of every child born in a country which owes its existence to the love of liberty in the human heart.

